DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 220 870 CS 207 205

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TITLE Sex-Role Stereotyping in Caldecott Award Books.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; Child Development; *Childhood Attitudes; *Childrens Literature; *Content Analysis; *Negative Reinforcement; *Picture Books; Sex Bias; Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; Textbook Research
IDENTIFIERS *Caldecott Award

ABSTRACT

Addressing the problem of sex stereotyping in the literature children are exposed to before they enter school, a study examined the extent to which sex role stereotyping exists in Caldecott Award winning books. The examination of 44 books published between 1937 and 1980 revealed 7 major categories of blatant sex stereotyping: (1) the achievements of females are attributed to their good looks, (2) norms are established that limit the aspirations and self-concept of females, (3) males perform all of the brave and important deeds, (4) females most frequently show strong emotion, (5) females are stereotyped in domestic roles, (6) males sit idly by while females perform domestic occupations, and (7) only males are depicted in a variety of occupations. These findings suggest that there is a significant reinforcement of sex role stereotyping in children's picture books--especially in the years when attitudes are most formative. Concerned educators, librarians, and parents can respond to these stereotypes by balancing the literature program with nonsexist books, developing an understanding of stereotypes, and providing counterexamples. (HOD)

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SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING IN CALDECOTT AWARD BOOKS

by

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Sex-Role Stereotyping in Caldecott Award Books

Though many publishers now employ guidelines for the elimination of sex-role stereotyping in school-bound textbooks and readers, sexism still flourishes in children's picture books. It was the purpose of the present study to determine to what extent sex-role stereotyping exists in the Caldecott Award winning books, which by virtue of their award-winning status are most likely to appear in public, school, and home libraries.

Inasmuch as children enter school with sex-role attitudes already being formed,[1] the effort to excise school textbooks of sexism and stereotyped sex roles may be after-the-fact. Although it is not advocated to diminish the effort to eliminate sexism whenever possible, more attention needs to be directed to that literature which children are exposed to before entering school. Only by examining the literature of this genre will it be possible to identify sex-role stereotyping influences of the formative years.

The researchers examined the forty-four books published between 1937 to 1980 that had been awarded the Caldecott Medal for the most distinguished picture book for children in the year of its publication. It was determined that females were portrayed in stereotypic roles in numerous cases.

Though some studies have employed somewhat dubious criteria in seeking to prove a point (e.g., "standing or sitting in a crowd" as an example of a domestic role), it was the goal of the researchers to isolate the most blatant stereotypic roles in children's

picture books, reserving as a stereotype only those examples that were predominantly attributed to one sex. There were seven major categories identified in this study.

The achievements of females are attributed to their good looks. In Cinderella[2] all the main character has to do to win the prince's love is to be beautiful. In Chanticleer and the Fox[3] Partlet is Chanticleer's favorite because she is the prettiest of the roost and conducts herself so well. In May I Bring a Friend?[4] an illustration at the end of the book depicts banners in which the king is extolled for his behavior reading: "Hurrah for the Brave King!" However, the queen is extolled for her appearance: "Hurrah for the Lovely Queen!"

Norms are established which limit the aspirations and self-concept of females. In Mei Li,[5] big brother is going to the New Year's Fair in the city, but "little girls always had to stay at home." Mei Li ponders, "'If I always stay at home, what can I be good for?'" The limited role of females permeates the entire story. Another example is big brother's statement, "'But only boys can be real actors!' . . . Girls couldn't be actors, Mei Li knew."

Males perform all of the brave and important deeds. In Mei Li[5] the little girl is too frightened to shoot firecrackers off herself so she gives them to her big brother and runs away with her fingers in her ears. He sneers at her, "'Girls are always afraid.'" In They Were Strong and Good[6] a woman is illustrated hanging her head over the railing of her husband's ship with the text reading ". . . she did not like sailing on the sea." Another

female character is described as not liking the Indians and being frightened by the lumberjacks. She is sent to a convent where "the nuns were very gentle and never spoke loudly." After Frog in Frog Went A-Courting'[7] asks Mistress Mouse to marry him, she replies, "'Without my Uncle Rat's consent, I would not marry the president!'" And indeed, the uncle's permission must be granted before the marriage can take place. In The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship[8] the daughter is not even consulted when the father gives her away in marriage. In Noah's Ark[9] a woman (possibly Noah's wife) is illustrated as standing on a table, apparently frightened of mice, while Noah stands with arms folded watching animals enter the ark.

Females most frequently show strong emotion. In Sylvester and the Magic Pebble[10] the parents stayed up all night when their son did not come home. The text reads: "Mrs. Duncan cried a lot and Mr. Duncan did his best to soothe her." The illustration that accompanies the text shows the mother seated with a tear in her eye. The father is standing next to her (no tears) with his arm around her. Several pages later, the mother is once again illustrated with a tear in her eye after the parents concluded that they would probably never see their son again. Nowhere is the father depicted as crying. In Fables[11] Mother Mouse is illustrated as waving goodby to her departing son with one hand while dabbing her eye with a handkerchief with the other. The father stands by watching, apparently with no tears.

Females are stereotyped in domestic roles. In twenty-three (52%) of the forty-four books included in the study, females were

described and/or illustrated as performing one or more of the following domestic occupations: (1) preparing and/or serving food (34%); (2) cleaning house (25%); (3) spinning, knitting, sewing, and/or weaving (18%); and (4) washing clothes and/or hanging clothes to dry (9%). (Women were often depicted as tending children, feeding animals, shopping and doing gardening/yardwork. However, as males are also frequently depicted in the same occupations, these were not considered stereotyped domestic roles.)

These statistics take on ever greater significance when compared to the number of occurrences when males are depicted performing these same occupations. There were no occurrences of males cleaning house. There were also no occurrences of males washing clothes and/or hanging clothes to dry. There were two books in which males were depicted preparing and/or serving food: The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship[8] and Fables.[11] Also, there were two books in which males were depicted spinning, knitting, sewing, and/or weaving: Duffy and the Devil[12] and Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions.[13]

Males sit idly by while females perform domestic occupations. In Mei Li[5] the first two pages of the text describe a scene where "Mei Li . . . was scrubbing and sweeping and dusting. Her mother . . . was baking and frying and chopping. . . .Only Uncle Wang sat without working. He was talking and laughing and singing of the sights to be seen in the city." In Sylvester and the Magic Pebble[10] the first illustration depicts the mother wearing a dress and apron and sweeping the floor with a broom. The father sits in an easy chair reading the paper and smoking a pipe. Near the end of the book, an illustration shows the mother laying out food;

the text reads: "Mr. Duncan walked aimlessly about while Mrs. Duncan set out the picnic food . . . ." In The Funny Little Woman[14] the wicked (male) oni stand by watching while the little old woman stirs a pot of rice. In Ox-Cart Man[15] Father is illustrated sitting and watching while Mother holds a kettle with dinner.

Only males are depicted in a variety of occupations. Males were represented in a total of fifty-nine occupations that were described and/or illustrated in thirty-one (70%) of the books in the study. These occupations ranged from Actor to Zoo Trapper. However, females were represented in only eight occupations outside the domestic role, and these were represented in only ten (23%) of the books in the study. These occupations were: (1) circus performer in Mei Li,[5] (2) nun in They Were Strong and Good,[6] (3) school governess in Madeline's Rescue,[16] (4) dairy woman in Chanticleer and the Fox,[3] (5) farmer in Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions,[13] (6) kindergartener in Nine Days to Christmas,[17] (7) pot maker in Arrow to the Sun,[18] and (8) vendor in Madeline's Rescue,[16] Nine Days to Christmas,[17] Always Room for One More,[19] The Funny Little Woman,[14] Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions,[13] and Ox-Cart Man.[15]

There is significant reinforcement of sex-role stereotyping in children's picture books. It is possible that children who are exposed to these picture books will develop perceptions that are distorted until stereotypes and myths are accepted as reality. Through these sexist attitudes, our society conveys to children role expectations that influence career aspirations as well as a great many other areas of living.

Leonard speaks to this point when he says:

> Sex-typing in regard to which occupations are appropriate is being reinforced throughout the primary grades. . . . This process is fairly well completed by second or third grade. By this stage, boys and girls have accepted either consciously or unconsciously the fact that certain occupations are appropriate for girls. Note, for example, when children play hospital that boys are always the doctors and girls always the nurses. . . . If roles are to be changed, orientation must begin at an earlier age.[20]

The dearth of women portrayed in the labor force in children's picture books are hardly representative of real life. Over half of all women over age sixteen are participating in the labor force, and it is now widely agreed that nine out of ten women will work outside the home at some time during their lives. Women now comprise more than forty-two percent of the total workforce with an average stay of twenty-five years.[21]

It is concluded that young children who read, or are read to from picture books are receiving significant reinforcement of sex-role stereotyping in the years when attitudes are most formative. Through these attitudes, society conveys to children role expectations that influence career aspirations as well as a great many other areas of living. With this in mind, it is possible to conclude that children's picture books may be contributing to forces that limit the productive lifestyle of the female members of our society.

Concerned educators, librarians, and parents should not treat sex stereotyping in literature like the weather--with everyone talking about it, but no one doing anything about it. Indeed, there are several options.

First, one may seek to censor an offending book. However, this does not appear to be a viable option because much fine literature, particularly the classics, would be eliminated. It is far better to add books that show men and women in all kinds of roles. Then, the children will be able to see for themselves how stereotypes have been created in the past and are now being dismantled. This learning experience will augment the children's understanding of this historical process.

Second, one may seek to develop understanding of a stereotype through discussion and/or explanation. It is important to consider each book in terms of the era in which it was created or the era it depicts. In so doing, it is important to help children consider how these attitudes are different from those prevalent today. Again, it is important to present a balanced program of literature in which children experience folktales, for example, with a wide variety of other types in which more true-to-life presentations are contained. Then children will have a basis for comparison when the discussion is turned to the way fairy tales present roles and the way our present-day society views these roles.

Third, one may search for counter examples that can be made available to the readers. It is important to be consciously aware of the problems which do exist and attempt to use them, not avoid them, to educate children about what is in the real world and how

to cope with it. For example, the picture book that depicts the mother cleaning house with the father sitting in an easy chair reading the newspaper would serve to spark a discussion of the reality of this situation in this world of working fathers and mothers, where homemaking responsibilities are being shared more fully, Also, distinguished biographies can introduce children to women and men who have not conformed to rigid definitions of appropriate sex-role behavior. These counter examples will help to achieve a positive concept of women's roles in history and curre. - events. While the importance of effective homemaking and child-rearing is acknowledged, it is essential that role models are provided that will show young females how to combine home life and work life satisfactorily.

We can do something about sex stereotyping in children's literature: balance the literature program, develop understanding of stereotypes, and provide counter examples. What we cannot afford to do is ignore stereotypes in the literature--it will only serve to reinforce the formation of sexist attitudes.

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